

Reviews: Terrorism Wieviorka

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Stephen Graham, ed., *Cities, War and Terrorism: Towards an Urban Geopolitics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004, 384 pp., ISBN 1405115742 (hbk), US\$94.95, 1405115750 (pbk), US\$39.95.

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This edited volume is one in an ever growing series of works in which the foundations of a field – in this case urban studies – are ‘rethought’ in the wake of the events of 9/11. The key question addressed in the text, as noted by Graham in the introduction, is: ‘how do urban areas and organized militarized conflict shape each other in these post-Cold War, post 9/11 times?’ (pp. 24–5). This is a very ambitious undertaking, but like many of the other projects conceived in the same vein, the ultimate outcome is mixed. After sifting through the various contributions included in the volume, the reader is left not with a coherent theoretical agenda capable of organizing future research or of giving shape to a new interdisciplinary field at the intersection of geopolitics, terrorism studies and urban studies, but with a rather weakly integrated mélange of disconnected theoretical pronouncements and detailed case studies. This in spite of the impressive – and almost Herculean – effort of the editor to bring order to the proceedings, by contributing not just an overall introductory chapter, but three separate introductions to each of the sections of the book, in addition to his own two substantive chapters.

Three major substantive axes of theoretical and substantive concern run through the contributions of the book: (1) the mutual constitution of war and the city, (2) the perennial status of the city as *both* a refuge against violence and a constant target of organized military violence (most of the authors in the collection seem fascinated by this double status of the city, as both a safe haven and a death trap) and (3) the various attempts by organized state agents to subject urban spaces to the patrolling and surveillance of central authorities. Here the city is seen as being – from the point of view of the ruling agents – a necessary evil, indispensable for material production and the international and domestic sustenance of the nation-state but at the same time always a potential sanctuary from the panoptic authority of the ruler. This has acquired more importance with the advent of terrorism as a new justificatory weapon for political elites to exert control over urban space (pp. 215–30).

The best papers in the book deal with the first topic, that of the mutual imbrication of the city and warfare. As Graham notes in the introduction, war and urban space have been mutually implicated since ancient times. The rise of centralized

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states in Europe after the 16th century, while seemingly presaging the end of the city as the central theater of war (as urban spaces became engulfed within the broader geographical boundaries of the nation-state), only served to modify the parameters of the connection between the war and the city but not to sever their intimate link. This became most obvious during the two great wars of the 20th century, when for the first time it became technologically and ideologically feasible to begin to plan and desire the *total annihilation* of urban space as a purposive goal of warfare. 'Total' war – such as the allied bombing of Dresden, or the German blitzkrieg on London – can from this perspective be reinterpreted as war against the city as such, as an attempt to completely destroy urban space. To understand this development, the authors deploy the innovative concept of 'urbicide', which can be defined as the 'deliberate denial, or killing of the city' (p. 25).

As pointed out in Martin Coward's contribution, 'Urbicide in Bosnia', a study of the destruction of urban space in the Bosnian–Serb conflict, the term 'urbicide' was coined by a group of architects in 1992 in an attempt to understand an until then largely obscured dimension of the conflict. The basic observation is that, in addition to targeting the physical *bodies* of the Bosnian people – the basic concern of those who brand the conflict as strictly genocidal – a concerted attempt, not explainable by the sole logic of genocide, to destroy the *physical infrastructure* of Bosnian life (markets, libraries, cafes) was also evident (pp. 158–67). Coward concludes that an urbicidal logic can be used to shed light on heretofore unexplained dimensions of the Bosnian–Serb conflict: 'Urbicide is the destruction of urban fabric insofar as it comprises the conditions of possibility of urbanity' (p. 169). Where does the hatred for the urban as such spring from? Coward notes that urbanity insofar as its primary characteristic is the 'agonistic heterogeneity in which identity is constituted in relation to difference' (p. 169) will always be the target of those groups whose ideological identity is premised on the denial of difference and the imposition of – social and cultural purity and homogeneity (such as Serb ethno-nationalists, or members of al Qaeda).

Martin Shaw's cultural-interpretive analysis of the relationship of urbicide to those contemporary cultural and social currents premised on the denial of cosmopolitanism and difference, in his theoretical contribution, 'New Wars of City', is an enlightening and innovative contribution, since it provides a (albeit provisional) sociohistorical and cultural theory of the genesis and structure of the anti-urban habitus. The deployment of the concept by other authors in the book, however, including Stephen Graham, is a tad more heavy-handed, precisely because this cultural interpretive link is missing. In my reading, this difference comes from the theoretical rift that separates a culturally informed social theory from those brands of contemporary Marxist analysis in which culture is reduced to primordial economic and political interests and in which most of the dynamics are attributable to the actions of all-powerful, all-knowing elites.

This is evident in Graham's analysis of urbicide. For Graham, as noted in his 'scene-setting' chapter, 'Cities as Strategic Sites: Place Annihilation and Urban Geopolitics', even though the weight of historical evidence demonstrates clearly that the premeditated, planned annihilation of cities during warfare results in loss of life that rivals any genocide, including the Holocaust, urbicide continues to be a taboo topic in urban social research. When looking at the consequences of purposive

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action by state agents, urban studies has concentrated on 'urban planning' geared toward the growth and development of urban space, but has ignored the equally weighty amount of planning that has gone into 'place-annihilation'. However, the division between these two sorts of planning is never clear-cut (p. 33).

When urban planning, through its massive displacement of populations, disruption of the local ecology and destruction of local cultures can have the same consequences as war, then it is time to look into the 'hidden history' of planning and the 'dark-side' of modernity to reveal how much of what we refer to as progress has come at the cost of the direct destruction of urban locales. This Graham sets out to do – with mixed results – in nine vignettes, in which, using a wide variety of historical, documentary and textual evidence, he shows how the large-scale military, economic and cultural projects of the inter-war and postwar periods, shared a similar set of premises (and sometimes purposes) centered on the crucial importance of urban space as a site to be manipulated, expanded and sometimes destroyed at the whim of state agents. This chapter, like many of the other chapters in the book, while impressive in the breadth of evidence and innovative insights – such as how neoliberal programs of urban 'unbuilding' or the anti-urban bias of contemporary science fiction movies can be seen as indirectly supporting the destruction of urban space – never adequately substantiates its key theoretical claim: that cities are the conscious targets of a systematic campaign of annihilation and manipulation by all-powerful state elites. It is one thing to note the (surely at least *sometimes* unintended although in the book most of these are interpreted as clearly intended) consequences of neoliberal capitalism or neoconservative urban politics or the overwrought futurism and technophilia of early 20th-century architecture, and another to demonstrate that this is all part of a well-coordinated plan of attack against the urban as such by well-placed political and economic elites.

Like now defunct strands of Marxist theory, the weakness with many of the contributions in this volume – especially the ones on place-annihilation and post 9/11 urban surveillance – is that they attribute *too much foresight* and unrealistic doses of anti-urban animus to forever unseen state agents. This point is important, because the crux of the idea of urbicide rests on the purposive and conscious attempt of ruling elites to destroy the city, as noted by Coward. While some of the examples provided by the various authors (such as Graham's chapter on the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, *Constructing Urbicide by Bulldozer in the Occupied Territories*) are *consistent* with such a reading, the onus is on the analyst to demonstrate empirically that this is the case. However, most of the chapters in this book, with the possible exception of Shaw's and Coward's, fail in this regard. A more balanced analysis, in my view, would have provided a more nuanced differentiation between the consequences of urban planning and urban annihilation that can be directly traced to the action of state elites and those which have a less direct – and in this respect are of a much more inherent theoretical interest – connection to the initial purposive action.

While the now attention-getting buzzword 'terrorism' adorns this book's title, those who expect an analysis of the relationship between terrorist activity and urban space will be disappointed. The last part of the book, which is most strictly concerned with terrorism, focuses on attempts by state agents and other political

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elites (as opposed to more mobile sub-state networks that have been the focus of more recent theoretical attention) to assert control of urban space. If space-annihilation and 'urbicide' are the organizing concepts of the first two sections of the book, this section is organized around the idea of 'surveillance' and all of the invariably negative and onerous consequences – intended or unintended, once again the distinction is seldom made – of the Bush administration's 'war on terror' for everything from quality of urban life (diagnosed as rapidly declining although this claim is thin on actual evidence) to economic planning and patterns of business location in the 'new' post-9/11 city (as detailed by Peter Marcuse in 'The War on Terrorism' and *Life in the Cities*'). This last section of the book appears to be the most uneven, with some solid contributions (such as David Lyon's informative chapter on technologies of surveillance in 'Technology vs Terrorism') joined by largely descriptive case studies of anti-IRA police strategies in London and the various infrastructural and human costs of the American bombing of Afghanistan.

In all, this book is an ambitious but ultimately overstretched endeavor to construct a field of urban geopolitics. As an attempt to bring into a dialogue those concerned 'with the critical analysis of cities' and those concerned with the 'critical analysis of political violence and international relations' (p. 333), it may certainly be a success. However, as an effort to bring these fields into productive theoretical synthesis, the book is less of a success, precisely because it is still hampered by modes of analysis tailored to the straightforward imputation of motives to local elites and the elementary tracing of simple causal chains as consequences of their actions, typical of traditional urban studies. However, the key thing to realize is that the contemporary social world (especially when interinstitutional linkages are considered in their most *global* aspects) is one that is, as noted by John Urry, inherently characterized by *complexity*. One notable exception in this regard is Timothy Luke's chapter on 'Everyday Technics and Extraordinary Threats', in which the status of modern urban spaces is one of highly complex *systems* in which 'normal accidents' occur (without being part of anyone's master plan) as a normal side-effect of such complexity (and the presumption, as shown by Luke, that they will only be utilized for 'amicable' purposes). Modern urban technoscapes, in their very integration and highly calibrated mutual dependency, open opportunities for 'terrorists to re-jigger through contra-governmental chaos, to impose devastating costs upon the conduct of everyday life' (p. 127).

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